

## SEEING THE GOOD

[With thanks to Rabbi Jack Reimer for the story]

Shanah Tovah! I hope you are finding the new prayer-book meaningful. I imagine that, like me, you are also finding it challenging. We have been using the Gates of Repentance for 40 years, so even though we only see it once a year, it is very familiar and therefore very comfortable. There is certainly a lot to be said for that. But on these Days of Awe, when we are supposed to be shaking ourselves up a bit, perhaps familiar and comfortable are not the characteristics to look for in a High Holy Day prayerbook. A prayerbook that challenges us may be a better choice. And if not, I promise, Mishkan haNefesh will be familiar and comfortable soon enough.

The main theme of the Days of Awe of course is repentance and we generally think of that as repenting for our own sins. As you know, when it comes to sins we have committed against God repenting is relatively easy. We are taught that all you have to do is ask, and if you really mean it, God will forgive you. But we are also taught that the High Holy Days cannot atone for the sins we have committed against other people unless we first seek and receive forgiveness from them. This tells us that while much or even most of this ten-day period is devoted to rooting out our own iniquities, at least some of it has to be spent forgiving the people who have hurt us. That's the only way the system works. God, we are told is eager to forgive us. It is not at all clear that we are quite as ready to forgive others.

But there are many good reasons for us to be forgiving. The first as I've said is that if we are not able to do this for each other the entire system of atonement breaks down. Who is going to be willing to forgive us if we aren't willing to do the same for them? From this perspective, being willing to forgive others is part of a mutual aid pact.

Another reason is a little more like enlightened self-interest. We have all heard many stories of people who hold grudges against others and are unable to move on with their lives while the offender has already moved on and is living happily ever after. So who is actually suffering in that situation? Sometimes we ought to forgive even if the person doesn't deserve it, or even if we have not been asked, simply to stop allowing that person to live rent free in our heads.

And sometimes, on a more positive note, we find ourselves able to forgive even if the person hasn't asked because we find within ourselves the ability to redefine or reframe the entire situation. Perhaps rather than seeing something as an act of malice enacted against us, we are able to understand it as an accident. Or perhaps we are able to imagine that the person had a reason to act as they did even if it turned out badly. It is much easier to forgive when we believe that the person did not have an evil intent. And it's even easier when the slight is relatively minor.

When we have been badly hurt it's more difficult. Either way it's worth the effort, both for the sinner and for ourselves.

This idea of trying to reframe a situation to give someone the benefit of the doubt is part of a concept called *Hakarat ha-tov* - seeking the good. It's a little bit like looking on the bright side, though not exactly. And it's a little bit like finding a silver lining but not exactly that either. *Hakarat ha-tov* really says that when a situation is open to even the slightest bit of interpretation, we ought to go for whichever interpretation lets us see that situation, and the people in it, in the most positive way.

Imagine you are walking down the streets of Manhattan and you see someone begging for change. You could say to yourself, "What a disgrace. That person ought to get a job. If I give them money, they'll probably just use it to get a drink." Or you could say to yourself, "What a shame. That person's life is clearly a mess. I don't know what they can do with a handful of change, but it looks like they need it more than I do." One situation, one set of evidence. The only difference is how we choose to interpret. The second interpretation is an example of *Hakarat ha-tov*.

Tonight I want to share with you a letter from Rabbi Jonah Rank. He wrote it a number of years ago when he was not yet a rabbi, but still a rabbinical student studying in Jerusalem. After discovering that his wallet had been stolen he composed an open letter to the thief which he posted on social media.

Dear Whoever Stole My Wallet in This Foreign Country,

I figured that this must be the end for me: no driver's license, no medical insurance, no credit cards, no debit cards, none of that \$300+ that was in my wallet when you took it.

I was at my apartment when I noticed the absence of that which you snatched from me.

The first thing I did was give up my dinner plans. I was supposed to bring some wine. Not tonight.

I retraced my steps to see if maybe I dropped it. Still, no wallet.

I called some friends I had spoken to earlier in the day. They offered me food for the night.

After we ate, I prayed a messianic hope: that all people in need of food will get the food they require. I didn't pray that because I believed it is possible. I prayed that because I wished it were possible.

My friends asked how they could help me. Could they lend me money? Could they give me food?

My family called from overseas. They canceled my cards and ordered new ones. Those are gradually on their way over here.

I have enough food for the next few days, and, though I have no money, I have a roof over my head.

But most importantly, I have loving and caring family and friends.

Honestly, aside from you, all of the strangers I've met here have been very friendly. But, that's not fair for me to say.

I didn't meet you.

Maybe you are homeless. With \$300 you can probably buy 100 decent sandwiches. Maybe you'll give one good meal to 100 starving children here.

But, then again, what can you do with my driver's license and my health insurance card? I mean, really.

It's tough for me to judge anyone, and perhaps this too is a messianic prayer: I pray that whatever you're doing with my wallet is far greater than anything I could have done with it. I hope that you are feeding the hungry, paying an expensive yet necessary medical bill, rescuing animals, or doing some other fantastic thing. But, for this, I pray because I believe it *is* possible.

You can take my cards, you can take my license, and you can take my cash. But you're not much of a thief.

You can take all of those things away from me, but you can never take away optimism, you can never take away prayer, and you can never take away the love and care of friends and family.

Maybe you made me broke. But you did not break me.

I still stand with the strong support of countless people in my life whose concern for me remind me on a daily basis how very rich I am just to be alive.

With much love for good people in a wonderful universe,

Jonah Rank

P.S. My name is my Gmail address. Let me know if you want to return my wallet yet.

The first time I read the letter, I had mixed feelings about it. There are parts of it in which he is clearly trying to find a way to see the best: "I hope that you are feeding the hungry, paying an expensive yet necessary medical bill, rescuing animals, or doing some other fantastic thing." And "Maybe you're homeless. With \$300 you can probably buy 100 decent sandwiches. Maybe you'll give one good meal to 100 starving children here."

Then he gets a little snarky: "But, then again, what can you do with my driver's license and my health insurance card? I mean, really."

I think I had mixed feelings because I really wanted him to embrace giving this guy the benefit of the doubt, and he was not quite ready to do it. But as I reread the letter, I came to appreciate the internal struggle which Jonah rank was self-aware enough to understand and honest enough to share publicly. This forgiveness

stuff is not easy. Giving someone who has hurt you the benefit of the doubt, especially with no evidence to back it up, is a hard thing to pull off. Jonah is not a saint. He is a human being, and he goes back and forth, wanting to imagine a scenario in which there is some redeeming quality to this thief, but not wanting to feel like a fool.

Having now read this letter many times, it's still unclear to me that Jonah Rank was ever able to convince himself that the person who took his wallet needed it more than he himself did. After all, he referred to his hope that this was so as a messianic prayer, one that he prayed not because it was likely, but because he wished it were possible. I think that the struggle itself is a great lesson for all of us.

No one said that forgiving someone else is easy. The opposite is true; it will likely be difficult, and the more deep the hurt, the more difficult it will be. Cut yourself some slack. You are not a bad person if, like Jonah Rank, you struggle to find it within yourself to completely and unequivocally forgive. Not making the attempt at all may be another story. This is a process. You might say the words, "I forgive you" because you really want them to be true, but discover that it takes a while for you to really mean them. That's okay. You are not obligated to be a saint, only to make a truly sincere effort.

In order to accomplish that, I Jonah Rank has another lesson to teach us. In the end, he came up with a different way of thinking about the event which still left him able to mostly, if not completely let go of what has happened. In the end, he focuses not on what he has lost, but on what he still has. He still has his optimism, and the love and support of family and friends, whose concern reminds him on a daily basis just how rich he is.

Think how much happier we could all be if we could see things this way, with a focus on what we still have, rather than on what we have lost, on how we have been hurt.

We should always try to find it within ourselves to forgive others, both for their sake and for our own sake. We might find it easier to do if we are able to see their actions through the lens of *hakarot ha-tov*. And even if we cannot quite get to that point, making the effort, engaging in the struggle as Jonah Rank did is still a worthwhile effort. It elevates us. It may make it easier to forgive someone else in the future. And that, after all, is one of the reasons we are here tonight.

I pray that the New Year 5780 will be one of great joy for each of us. And if it is a year that also holds setbacks, may we be able to focus on all that we still have. May those we hurt be willing to forgive us, and may we be able to do the same for those who hurt us. And through it all, may we remain rich in our appreciation for the many blessings which fill our lives.